R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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THE ROLE OF PHONICS IN TEACHING READING.

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PUB DATE APR 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.60 13P.

DESCRIPTORS- *PHONICS, *BEGINNING READING, READING INSTRUCTION,

TEACHERS AND READING SPECIALISTS ALMOST UNIVERSALLY ACCEPT PHONICS CONTENT IN READING PROGRAMS. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT PHONICS WHICH INVOLVE QUESTIONS SUCH AS HOW PHONICS SHOULD BE PRESENTED, WHAT CONTENT SHOULD BE INCLUDED, AND WHEN IT SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED. THIS STUDY RAISES SOME BASIC ISSUES AND PROVIDES GUIDELINES FOR ACTION. THE ANALYTIC AND SYNTHETIC APPROACHES HAVE BEEN USED DURING RECENT DECADES. HOWEVER, TEACHER JUDGMENT AND KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT IS BEST MUST STILL BE RELIED ON. THE STUDY CONCLUDED THAT PHONICS HAS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THE TEACHING OF READING. PHONIC ANALYSIS IS BEST USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHER WORD IDENTIFICATION TECHNIQUES TO UNLOCK WORDS WHICH ARE KNOWN IN THEIR SPOKEN FORM BUT UNKNOWN IN THEIR WRITTEN FORM. TEACHERS RATHER THAN METHODS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT VARIABLE IN THE TEACHING PROCESS. TEACHERS SHOULD BE AWARE OF RESEARCH RELATING TO METHODS AND MATERIALS AND SHOULD UTILIZE THEIR KNOWLEDGE IN ADJUSTING PROCEDURES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS. REFERENCES ARE INCLUDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (BOSTON, APRIL 24-27, 1968). (JM)

[INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION, BOSTON, APR. 24-27, 196

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Session 13A The Role of Word Recognition

In the past, there has been much controversy among teachers concerning the value of phonics to the teaching of reading. Some have argued that phonics has limited usefulness because of the relatively unphonetic character of the English language; others have felt that such knowledge is not only useful, but a necessary part of the reading program. Fortunately, there are now some limited agreements about the use of phonics in the teaching of reading.

RE 001 232

There is no longer any serious doubt about whether phonics content should be included in the reading program; teachers and reading specialists almost universally accept it as an indispensable tool for teaching children to read. Disagreements concerning phonics are still very much in evidence, but they have now centered largely on questions of (1) How should phonics be presented, (2) What content should be included, and (3) When should it be emphasized. Though space will not permit a penetrating analysis of these questions, an attempt will be made to raise some basic issues regarding the manner in which they may be answered and to provide reading teachers with guidelines for action until results of research and practice answer them more adequately.

How Should Phonics Be Taught

Historically, there have been several different approaches to the teaching of phonics. In recent decades it has been customary to categorize them into two main types, (1) analytic approaches and (2) synthetic approaches.

The analytic approaches to teaching phonics are those approaches in which the teacher first teaches a limited number of sight words, possibly 75 to 100, and then teaches the reader to utilize these known words to infer letter-sound associations for unknown words. In presenting phonics analytically, a teacher might teach a number of sight words, including for example, bat, bill, and bug. Then by analyzing the words and noting that they all begin with the same sound, the students learn the letter-sound association for b. Subsequently,

when unknown words such as basket, bitter and bundle occur in his reading, the student will know the b sound and will thus have a clue to help him identify the words.

The synthetic approaches to teaching phonics are those approaches in which the teacher first teaches the sounds which certain letters represent and then teaches the pupil to combine (or synthesize) the sounds into words. Following one of the synthetic approaches, a teacher would first present the sounds represented by the printed form of the letters, for example, p usually sounds like puh, a sounds like ă and t sounds like tuh. When the sounds are blended, the word is pat. Later on, when the student meets words like pen and pig, he will know that they begin with the p sound and thus he will have a clue to their identification.

Since the early 1930's, those who favored analytic approaches have been in the majority, but there has been continuous support for the synthetic approaches. Recently, since linguistic scholars have focused attention on "breaking the code" as the prime emphasis for early reading instruction, the synthetic approaches have gained remarkably in their popularity. Beginning with the Boston studies in the mid-fifties (7) and continuing with the Sparks-Fay study (11), the Bear study (3), the Bliesmer-Yarborough study (4), and the USOE First and Second Grade Studies (8), evidence has been presented to support the contention that synthetic approaches provide a more rapid start in reading than analytic approaches do.

Chall (5) recently presented a convincing case for those reading programs which make use of the synthetic approaches. Under a grant from the Carnegie Foundation, she has made a searching analysis of the major research findings related to problems of beginning reading instruction. One of her major conclusions was that "code emphasis" approaches (synthetic approaches) proved superior, at least in the primary grades, to "meaning emphasis" approaches (analytic approaches).

There does appear to be some question about whether early gains made by synthetic approaches can be maintained as the children progress through the reading program (11). Further longitudinal research is needed on this very important point, but one would think that intermediate grade teachers and curriculum workers could find ways of maintaining reading gains achieved by primary grade teachers, almost regardless of the manner in which the gains were achieved.

This assumption, however, may be entirely contrary to fact. Children taught by synthetic methods may over-learn some word-analysis habits which later militate against reading growth; they may learn to concentrate so intently on word analysis that attention to meaning is impeded; they may acquire habits that slow reading rate and thus make it difficult to comprehend rapidly; they may grow to believe that reading is a process of drill on seemingly meaningless sounds and thus grow to dislike reading. If in their zeal for phonics mastery primary grade teachers have over-emphasized habits that will need to be unlearned at a later date, then it does seem probable that children taught by the more moderate or the more analytic approach would become the better readers.

With present knowledge teachers still must rely somewhat on their own judgment about what is best. It is comforting to note that children do learn to read by any of several methods. At this point in time a reasonable course seems to be: (1) Teach letter-sound associations relatively early in the reading program with a synthetic emphasis while at the same time considering interest and comprehension as prime goals and prime guides for teaching procedures. (2) After the child has progressed sufficiently in his word recognition ability, shift the emphasis rather rapidly to comprehension while at the same time trying to foster high interest in reading.

What Phonic Content Should Be Taught

Through the years much information has been compiled concerning speech sounds and their written representations. It is a generally accepted fact that some of the information is helpful in teaching reading and some of it is not. In fact, this is implied by the way phonics is defined. Phonetics is generally defined as the science of speech sounds, while phonics is defined as that portion of phonetics which is applicable in teaching children to read. For the purpose of teaching reading, it is neither feasible nor desirable to try to teach all that is known about phonetics.

One of the basic reasons for including any phonetic knowledge in a reading program is to improve the efficiency of the teaching process. To do this, programs should concentrate on content which occurs frequently in reading, is easy to teach, and is relatively regular in its application.

Studies by Clymer (6), Fry (10), Bailey (2), and Emans (9) have investigated the question of "what content" by making use of one or more of the above criteria in judging the value of selected phonic content. They have found that at least some of the phonic content that is usually included in reading programs is not adequately justified by these criteria. These studies need to be expanded and amplified into other pertinent areas, but they do provide some substantial data which should prove extremely helpful as teachers concern themselves with problems of what phonic content should and should not be included in the reading program.

Some Basic Considerations

In determining the proper role of phonics in a reading program, one needs to consider underlying factors which relate to this role. Some of the basic considerations are included below.

Children differ in their ability to benefit from a sound-oriented approach to the teaching of reading. It seems plausible to assume that some children learn better from a method which emphasizes a whole-word approach to word recognition while others probably learn better from a method which emphasizes sound-symbol correspondence. To put it another way, some children probably learn better through visual means while others learn better through auditory means. Generally speaking, teaching materials are designed with the underlying assumption that all children learn equally well with all modalities. This may or may

not be a correct assumption. Thus it seems logical to advise that whenever a child is experiencing difficulty with learning to read, the teacher should investigate the possibility that he may be emphasizing the least effective modality for the child in question.

Research studies that arrive at generalizations about which method works best for large groups of children miss a very basic point, i.e., methods which produce significantly higher mean scores for the total group do not necessarily work best for each individual student in the group. Certain individuals may profit more from a method which has been shown to produce significantly lower mean scores than another. Teachers should recognize this as a possibility and adjust their teaching accordingly.

It seems likely that some words are more easily learned by a phonic method than by a sight method, while others are more easily learned by the sight method. High frequency, but irregularly sounded words probably are more efficiently taught by a sight method while phonetically regular words and words which contain easily learned sounds probably are better taught by a phonic method. Learning the word recognition skills is a step in a developmental process, one of the goals of which is to know a large number of words by sight. Accomplishing this goal by the most efficient method is important. Sometimes the most efficient method is determined by the nature of the word itself.

A given child may be able to utilize a sound-oriented approach better at one age than another. The concept of reading readiness suggests that there is an optimum time in the developmental process for a child to learn any given skill. Presumably, attempts to teach a skill prior to this optimum time will prove unsuccessful and may even cause emotional or psychological problems which seriously retard normal growth. Also, it is assumed that if instruction is postponed until later than this optimum time, the skill involved is not as readily learned as it would have been at the optimum time.

In a like manner, each child may have an optimum time in his total development for learning phonics content. For some, phonic readiness may be achieved relatively early in school while others may take considerably longer. In presenting phonics content, teachers should consider the natural growth patterns of the pupils.

How the teacher feels about the teaching procedure which he is following seems to make a difference in the effectiveness of the teaching method. If children can learn to read by any of several approaches, which apparently they can, then how the teacher feels about the method may well be one of the most important factors in determining its success. If the teacher is philosophically committed to the method he is using, then he is likely to do a good job of teaching reading regardless of how good or how bad the method might be. When selecting a particular phonics program or determining degree of emphasis on content or methodology, one of the key factors to be considered should be what the teachers think about it.

Interest may not be directly related to method. It is doubtful that one method is inherently more interesting than another. Enthusiastic teachers can take very dull content and make an interesting lesson out of it. Others can take what seems to be very interesting material and create pure drudgery for children. Whether or not a method is interesting is probably less related to method than it is to other factors related to the teaching-learning situation.

Two factors which influence pupil interest are variety of presentation and appropriateness of teaching level. If presentations are varied within a method, interest is not likely to be lacking. Likewise, if a child is given a learning challenge, but at a level where he has a relatively good chance for success, he will seldom lose interest. The important point related to phonics is that approaches probably should not be accepted or rejected because of interest or lack of it. Rather, effective approaches should be selected for use and then adjustments made in the teaching situation to maintain a high interest level.

Guidelines For The Reading Teacher

In teaching phonics, the major task which confronts today's reading teacher is how to maintain a proper balance between attention to phonics and attention to other important reading goals. The myriad of research results and the verbal wranglings of reading "experts" are likely to confuse the average teacher about the proper course of

action as he performs the daily tasks of teaching reading. The following are suggested as broad guidelines to follow as teachers attempt to determine the role of phonics in the teaching of reading.

Phonics content is taught so that children have a tool to identify words which are known in the spoken form but not in the printed form. All decisions concerning the use of phonics should reflect this purpose. Teachers should regularly ask themselves whether or not the phonic content being taught and the methods being employed in teaching it contribute to the accomplishment of this major purpose. If not, the teacher should adjust accordingly.

Phonics is but one aspect of word recognition; word recognition is but one goal of the reading program. Phonics is best used in conjunction with other word recognition skills. As a child learns to read, he gradually learns several ways to identify words. Ideally, he learns them in such a manner so that he can coordinate and combine their use as he attacks unknown words. The ability to use sound-symbol relationships is one of the more important reading skills, but it is just one and should be so considered.

The second aspect of this guideline has to do with the relationship of word recognition skills to the total reading program. Word identification techniques should be taught in a manner that facilitates, not hampers the attainment of other important reading goals. Intensive attention to phonics can seriously impair progress toward goals of speed, interest, and meaning; teachers need to recognize this possibility so that emphasis can be adjusted to best serve the total reading program.

The teacher is the key person in determining the success of a reading program. Whether or not children learn better by one method than another is largely determined by the skill and enthusiasm of the teacher. In recent years, research has consistently shown that the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the most important variable relating to how well the pupils in a class learn to read. Effective functioning in such a key role requires that a teacher know as much as possible about (1) phonics and research related to phonics, (2) the total reading process, and (3) the pupils' reading abilities and needs.

Acting in terms of the preceding guidelines leads one directly to the next. Teachers should take an active part in determining the role of phonics in the reading program. On the whole, modern day teachers are well-trained, competent people who are capable of determining the reading needs of pupils and adjusting the program to meet these needs. Caring for individual differences is a constant job and only teachers are in a position to know these needs well enough to adjust instructional procedures to meet them; they should be encouraged to do so.

This guideline means, for example, that teachers should adjust content and method for children who are slow learners or fast learners; for children who have speech and hearing problems; and for those who learn better through visual means than through auditory means. It means that teachers need to recognize and adjust for the fact that some phonic content is learned by all pupils without any direct teaching.

It is recognized that adjusting for individual differences is an age-old problem that has no easy solutions. Nevertheless, with the wide variety of high quality materials available to today's teachers, intensive efforts toward recognizing differences and providing for them can produce rich benefits for the pupils.

Relatively speaking, phonics should be taught fairly early in the reading program. Basically, the two major goals of a reading program are word recognition and comprehension. These goals can hardly be separated, but for instructional purposes it is probably better to place the heavy emphasis on one and then the other. Early in the process of learning to read, word recognition (including phonics) should receive major attention, and as progress is made, the emphasis should be shifted to comprehension.

Summary

Phonics has an extremely important role to play in the teaching of reading. In this paper it is assumed that phonic analysis is best used in conjunction with other word identification techniques for the purpose of unlocking words which are known in their spoken form but unknown in their written form. It is known that the pupils can learn to read by any of a number of methods. Thus teachers, rather than method, are the most important variable in the teaching process. Teachers are encouraged to know research relating to methods and materials and to utilize their knowledge in adjusting their procedures to the individual needs in their own classrooms. Guidelines for making these adjustments are provided.

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